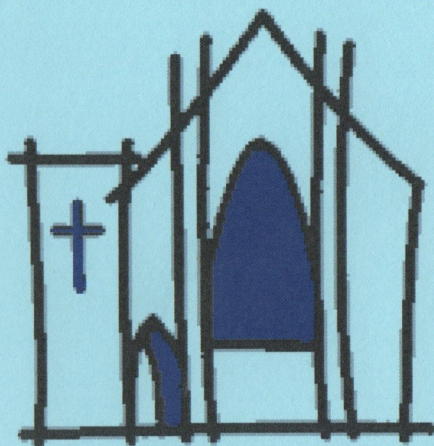


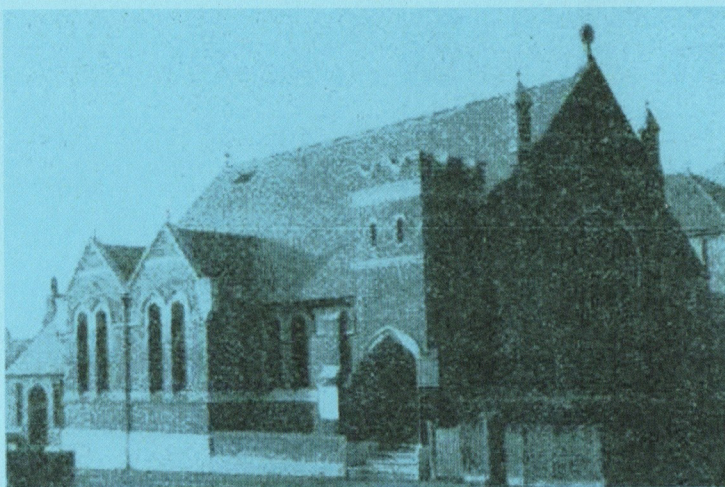
Christ Church Methodist Church

A History

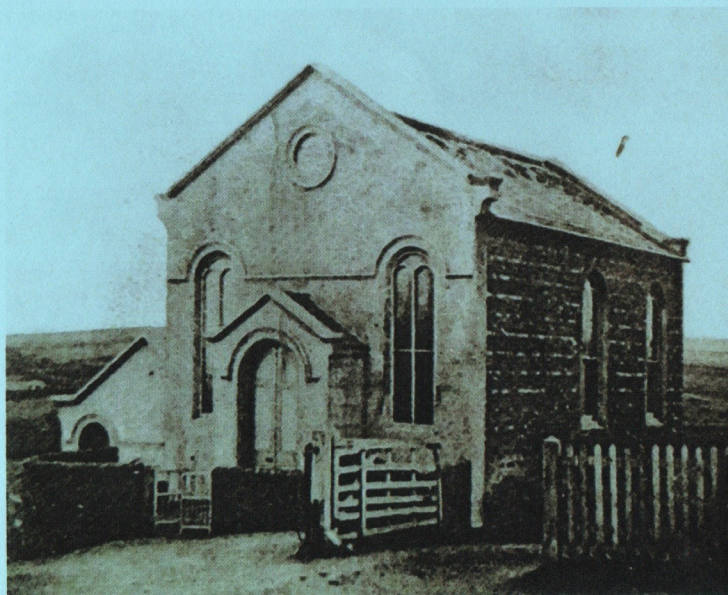


CHRIST CHURCH
METHODIST CHURCH
BEXHILL-ON-SEA

2017



CHRIST CHURCH - SPRINGFIELD ROAD



BELLE HILL

Christ Church Methodist Church: A History

By

Harry Hoad

George Owers

Updated by Joyce Thomas in 1996

Updated by George Bunker and Jill Read in 2017

Preface to Church History update – April 2017

In March 2017 Christ Church Methodist Church celebrated its 110th anniversary. The Church Council felt that this would be a good time to update the church history booklet produced in 1996 to mark the Centenary so that the story of the church's history can be brought up to date. We are grateful to Jill Read and George Bunker for their work in preparing and writing this booklet.

The mission of the Church is to worship God and to share in Christ's mission of service and proclaiming the good news of God's love to all people. This task remains ever before us although the ways we express it will of course change to meet the situation and needs of each age. This updated history is an account of how the people of God at Christ Church have continued to witness to the love of God in the wider community as they seek to serve the present age. May you be encouraged by the on-going story of God's people at Christ Church and inspired for all that is yet to be.

Revd Tricia Williams

BELLE HILL: THE LITTLE CHAPEL ON THE HILL 1825...and Before

Did John Wesley visit Bexhill? We have no record that he did, but it is known that he visited Rye on several occasions and that he preached his last outdoor sermon under "Wesley's Tree" at Winchelsea.

There must have been many other preaching places in the district, for in the year 1763 two preachers were appointed to the Rye Circuit.

It is known that there were many coastguards among Wesley's converts. At that time the coastguard's duty of patrolling the coast was most important owing to the fear of invasion by the French. So the good news of the Gospel preached by John Wesley spread from one coastguard station to another. Services were being held in villages right along the coast, except at Hastings where the new ideas met with severe opposition. At Bexhill, on the other hand, the response must have been considerable, for in the year 1809 there was a vigorous Methodist cause with 23 members, including coastguards.

Belle Hill in the Early Days

In any early reference to Methodism in Bexhill, we find that "Belle Hill," not the Old Town, was the meeting place of our people. First they met in a cottage by the stream at the foot of the hill, and later in a loft over some stables next to the "White House." Then in the year 1825, the chapel was built on land bought from the Government after the soldiery had vacated it. The original chapel had seating accommodation for 100 persons. It was lit by tallow candles, and it is on record that two coastguards, Ashdown and Douglas, went around during the service to snuff them. In the year 1822, due to the energies of a Mr. Beck from Lewes, a minister was appointed to Hastings. Bexhill was then transferred from the Lewes plan to become part of the Hastings circuit and regular services were held, conducted chiefly by local preachers.

There are many stories of the lively times occasionally experienced during these services. During the sermon and in the prayer meeting that followed there were constant enthusiastic outbursts and some real conversions. We can personally remember some of these old folk "giving their experience" at the class meeting. They loved to tell of the time when they "gave their heart to the Lord." One special occasion (often mentioned) was on a New Year's Eve. That night a group of those men had "seen the Old Year out" at the public house. Rolling home much the worse for drink, they heard the Methodists at the top of the hill singing the New year in. They were attracted by the music to go in, and before they left they decided to give themselves to God. One old brother, who pushed around a cart as

a scissor grinder used to tell how he had often got so drunk that he slept the night by his cart outside the pub.

Another brother started to deliver tracts by the seashore. One day he offered one to a smart young man. The latter refused it, saying, "Can't you see that I am a gentleman?" The old man answered, "I be a gent, too. I be a King's son."

The Mutual Improvement Society

As the Church developed, more consideration was given to the educational and social side of the christian life. The Mutual Improvement Society did much in this direction. Its programme was somewhat similar to the Wesley Guild of today, but emphasis was given to debates on vital subjects. One feature was for a paper to be read by a member, then the rest would pull it to pieces. Quite a number of young men acquired the art of public speaking at those gatherings.

A Missionary Church Expands

The missionary spirit was always strong at Belle Hill. By the year 1837 a cause was started at Little Common. Its first chapel was primitively built with mud but the Gospel preached there brought men and women to God. In spite of severe opposition many held to their faith and continued to witness for their Lord.

In the year 1840 a mission was started in a carpenter's shop in Sidley. Some of our most devoted members laboured in the work there.

In the year 1853 at Pevensey Sluice (now known as Norman's Bay) services were started in the coastguard's boathouse. There was no proper roadway from Bexhill in those days and the preachers had to walk along the beach to get to the service.

By the year 1887 Bexhill had begun to grow rapidly. Great developments were being planned by the Lord De la Warr, and many houses were built south of the railway. In its wisdom the St. Leonards Circuit decided to purchase a plot of land in Sackville Road with the purpose of establishing a cause in the centre of the new town. To prepare for this occasion the Church at Belle Hill began to work. In the year 1890 a group of her devoted members, while retaining their offices at Belle Hill, opened a mission hall in Station road, opposite the old railway station. Among their number should be mentioned Mr. F. Wimshurst, Mr. F. Christian and Mr. S. Lennard. The work was so blessed by God that in 1892 the school chapel (now known as the Parkhurst Hall) was built and the work at Station Road was transferred there. A separate society was formed and a minister appointed to serve the two communities.



CHURCH FAMILY 2017

The Mission Band

Another useful development was the mission band. A group of young people went out as a gang, singing the Gospel and conducting open air services in the district, assisted by a portable harmonium. They also held cottage meetings and went into the villages supporting the preachers.

One direct result was seen in the formation of a new society in Hamilton Road (now Chandler Road). Perhaps the finest result was in the members themselves. They learned to pray and to give their testimony in public. In the course of time several of the young men came on the plan as local preachers, others took up work in the Sunday School and as Church Leaders.

Perhaps the greatest missionary enterprise was the result of what appeared at the time to be a disaster, as some of these efforts had to be curtailed and some given up. The reason was that round the years 1909 to 1912 there was a slump in trade, especially in the building industry and many of our best workers became unemployed. A Government-assisted passage scheme made it possible for them to emigrate. As a result several whole families went out to start a new life in Canada, New Zealand, Australia, etc. We rejoiced to know that wherever they went they joined a Church and where there was none, commenced to hold services in their own homes. Some took their examinations while continuing their employment and in due course were ordained to the Ministry. There are still many in all parts of the English speaking world who look upon "Belle Hill" as their spiritual home and they are happy to declare that the inspiration in their service for their Lord was found in the "Little Chapel on the Hill."

The Spirit Still Lives.

It is not surprising, then, that when in 1938 a proposal of Methodist Union was made involving the closing down of "Belle Hill" the first reaction was that there was too much to give up; but after long and prayerful consideration it was unanimously decided to join forces with the friends at "Christ Church."

We are confident that still the "spirit of Old Belle Hill" lives and that the union is an outstanding result of the guiding hand of the Living Lord.

--Harry Hoad

PRIMITIVE METHODISM AT CHRIST CHURCH

It was in the year 1865 that a small band of missionaries from Hastings came to the village of Sidley, and, standing on the village green, sang hymns and preached the simple gospel of Primitive Methodism. This visit appears to have created much interest among the very small population of the village and district, and further visits led to definite conversions and the regular holding of Sunday and mid-week services in the houses of the new converts. Before long a definite society was formed and the idea of building a chapel was mooted.

In the year 1873, a plot of land was secured at Haddocks Hill (now Wrestwood Road), and a small chapel was built to seat about 100 people, at a cost of £290. For some years the work of the chapel and its ministry met with varying success, until towards the close of the century a remarkable revival in the village of Westfield brought a great spiritual uplift to the Hastings Primitive Methodist Circuit, of which Sidley formed a part. This revival came to Sidley with great power and many men and women, including several young people, experienced the joy of a changed life, and the little chapel became full Sunday by Sunday. Once again the challenge to expand came, but money was scarce, and so the members began to pray - and how they prayed - believing that the door would open.

Meanwhile, the growing district of Bexhill and Sidley witnessed a great struggle between a firm of brewers and the Temperance Movement over the brewers' attempt to obtain a licence for a public house on the corner of Springfield Road and Holliers Hill. Victory came to the temperance forces, but to make sure that this victory endured, Mr. Marshall Jay, a London churchman, bought the site, and by various means was brought into touch with the society. In this way the prayers were certainly answered, the land was presented to the Primitive Methodist Connection, and with the generous financial assistance of Mr. Jay, backed by sacrificial gifts and labour from members and friends, Christ Church, Springfield Road, was dedicated and opened on 20th March, 1907.

At the time of opening, the building embodied several distinctive features. The tower entrance, the Maltese Cross surmounting the North Wall, the beautiful stained glass window, with the central text, "Occupy till I come" and the impressive Aberdeen granite foundation stones, engraved with the names "Jesus" and "Emmanuel," also the smaller plain cross at the south end of the roof, still stand bearing witness to the Christian Faith. The total cost of the building was £1,588, the debt at opening being £968.

From the time of opening, congregations and membership increased, and the second minister of the circuit was moved from St. Leonards to Bexhill to take charge of the work. When the Rev. F. Shimmin commenced his ministry in 1910, a scheme had been inaugurated whereby the debt could be wiped out. The old chapel in Wrestwood Road was sold, special efforts to raise funds were inaugurated, and so successful was the impact both on the Church and neighbourhood, that the Rev. Mr. Shimmin's period of ministry was extended until 1914, and at the seventh anniversary, the last £200 was handed to the treasurer as the packed congregation rose and sang the Doxology.

Almost immediately came the blow of the 1914-1918 war, during which the ministry of the church maintained a service of comfort to many who were bereaved, and welcomed troops stationed in the neighbourhood. After the war the Eastbourne and Hastings circuits were amalgamated, and the Rev. W. R. Bird was sent as minister-in-charge at Bexhill. Mr. Marshall Jay had some time before presented the church with the plot of ground opposite the church, and it was decided to build there a manse. In the year 1922 this manse was completed and the Rev. W. R. Bird was its first occupant. Mr. Bird retired from the ministry in July 1924, becoming Bexhill's first librarian and a well-known figure in the life of the town. For the next ten years there was a succession of ministers, who, during that difficult period sustained the ministry, most of the time as a pastorate, under the care of the Missions Committee of the Primitive Methodist Church. They were supported by a band of loyal members who never failed in the belief that a Church with such a beginning would one day go forward to greater things.

In 1932 came the uniting of the various branches of the Methodist Church, and the new Church stationed the Rev. D. M. Bowman, ex-chairman of the Primitive Darlington District, at Bexhill, to further the closest union in the neighbourhood. Gradually the society was brought into ever closer contact with the Belle Hill ex-Wesleyan society, and in a spirit of real fellowship the two societies merged, the Belle Hill Chapel was closed, in 1938 a new era began.

Under the ministry of the Rev. J. L. Clough, the new society enlarged the school and the classroom premises, and all seemed to point to a new period of advance, when the second world war again curtailed all efforts towards expansion. Once again the Church served the whole neighbourhood through that strenuous period, the value of such service being proved by the help given toward the installation of the pipe organ in 1945, which was opened for service free of debt as a thanksgiving to God for all his love and mercy throughout those years. The many difficulties due to re-adjustment - national and local - were overcome once again by the loyal service of ministers and members, and the Church approaches its Jubilee with a spiritual vigour inspired by the same vision and sustained by the same intensive prayer as that which gave birth the Christ Church, Springfield Road.

--George Owers

NOTES ON OUR CHURCH BUILDING

This little Church reflects in its actual building as many changes as we have seen in this century in the constitution of the denominations themselves.

It started as a Primitive Methodist Chapel - the least structured of the three parts of old Methodism. The "prims," who came into being in the mid-nineteenth century sought to throw off the formality that had gathered around Wesleyan Methodism and return to the original ways: the outdoor preaching and the simplicity of their life together, reflected in the simplicity of their plain church buildings.

Two of the most active founding families here were the Cliftons and the Careys, some of whose descendants still worship with us today.

In view of all this, it is a surprise to find stained glass windows in such a place, and the reason for this is that the site for the Chapel was given by a Mr. Marshall Jay, an Anglican businessman from London, who had come to live in Bexhill at the turn of the century. This Anglican connection is also reflected in the pew under the smaller stained glass window which has a brass plate reading "The Churchwarden's Pew."

The original chapel had a rostrum across the front, providing a central preaching place, to indicate the prime importance of the Word of God, with approach stairs at either side and the Communion Table way below, almost at ground level. You can still see the outline of the rostrum on the wall beneath the Cross. All the singing was accompanied by a harmonium.

The chapel was opened in 1907 and formed a little Circuit with another chapel in Newgate Road, St. Leonards, for the first 30 years or so. However, in 1932, the three parts of Methodism joined together to form the Methodist Church as we now know it. Here at Christ Church the numbers had declined and, just before the war, in a momentous decision, the friends at Belle Hill Wesleyan (now a nursery school) agreed to unite with us, stipulating only that extra accommodation should be added for all the youth work they would wish to engage in - hence the building of the Hall, the kitchen and the cloakroom facilities.

The next major change was the installation of the present organ as a Peace Memorial in 1945. It is a "Father Willis" and came from a large country house that was being dismantled. The then Circuit Superintendent, the Rev. Frank Raynor, enabled our church to purchase it during the ministry of the Rev. Frank Hargreaves.

In time for the Golden Jubilee, 1957, the interior of the Church was completely altered: the rostrum was pulled down and a new pulpit placed to one side, the Communion Table centrally placed after the old Wesleyan manner. This work was completed by Mr. Douglas Noble during the ministry of the Rev. Ronald Rawlings.

From the beginning the main entrance to the Church was in Springfield Road, where the display window now is, but two more important changes took place in the eighties during the ministry of the Rev. Gordon Chambers: first the creation of a vestibule, by removing certain pews and the placing of a glass screen, which was engraved by Mr. Cedric Gillham with motifs of a Methodist significance; and later, the blocking of the Springfield Road entrance and the addition of a ramp on the Holliers Hill side, with the new entrance there.

Just as our Christian faith evolves through the years of our life, so this Church has been adapted to the needs of each succeeding generation.

--Joyce Thomas

CHURCH HISTORY UPDATE 2017

The original history of Christ Church Methodist Church was compiled in 1957 as part of the church Golden Jubilee celebrations, by Harry Hoad and George Owers. It was updated in 1996 by Joyce Thomas, when Rev Cynthia Park was our minister. Now, celebrating our 110th birthday, we have been asked to bring our story up to date. A lot has happened in the intervening years, but in light of the long, sometimes heart searching years, very little has changed!

Christchurch adopted the following as our Mission Statement:

Proclaiming Jesus Christ our Lord
Stressing the power of prayer
Developing the Service and Gifts of all
Involving all age groups

For many years our minister had lived at The Manse, the detached house directly opposite the church in Springfield Road. When Rev Gordon Chambers came in 1981 he had pastoral oversight for both ourselves and the Little Common Methodist Church, and so the Manse was sold and another property in Knebworth Road (situated halfway between our two churches) became the home of the minister and his family. In more recent times our minister has also taken on responsibility for Sackville Road Methodist Church, thus the previous manse of the Sackville Road minister has now become the home of the minister of all four churches (including Ninfield Methodist Church). This heavy workload on one person's shoulders has been replicated throughout the Hastings, Bexhill and Rye circuit with only 3 ministers covering the whole area.

In 1996 Rev Roger Leslie replaced Rev Cynthia Park as our minister, and he remained with us until 2008, seeing us through our extensive Centenary Programme of Events in 2007, which included a Civic Service inviting back our past ministers, and a Thanksgiving Service in March. During his ministry with us, we enjoyed four Family Weekends, in Hertfordshire,

Kent and Pilgrim Hall in East Sussex , exploring our faith and enjoying each other's company. In 2000 a party from the church, together with friends from far and near experienced the Oberammergau Passion Play in Germany, performed every 10 years to commemorate Christ's life, suffering and resurrection. During 2007 we were offered the chance to buy the house next door to the church. Because of the shape of the church building and the fact that the hall was overlooked by the upstairs windows of the house it was going to be difficult to sell, so after much thought, prayer and discussion it was agreed that we would purchase the house as a Church and Community Centre and so Centenary House came into being, helped by a couple of very generous legacies from friends and long standing members. It is owned by the circuit and is operated on their behalf by a small management committee based at Christchurch. The circuit administrative officer occupies one of the upstairs rooms whilst the others are available for outside lettings and has several regular bookings by the local Primary Care Trust and seasonal usage as a well established Bexhill student summer school. The church Pre-School makes good use of the outside areas when weather conditions permit. As part of our Centenary Celebrations Christchurch presented a cup to the Bexhill Carnival Committee to be presented each year for the winner of the Church group and we were very proud to win back the cup on several occasions, promoting our existence to all who watched the annual carnival procession as it wound its way through the streets of Bexhill to the Polegrove.

In 1998 Rev Stephen Maunder became our minister and for the first time we had the superintendent minister of the circuit as our minister. Stephen had been the minister of Sackville Road before becoming our minister, and so we had got to know him and his family well. The workload of a minister increases year by year, with fewer candidates entering the ministry and the work of the various committees and organisations within each church all needing the ministers valuable time. Our Mission and our Outreach has changed and developed over the years and we are now much more inclined to go out to the people, rather than sit back and assume they are coming to us!

A 21st century innovation has been the introduction of a Power Point system, enabling details of the service, together with the hymn words

and extra graphics to be projected onto a giant screen at the front of the church. This again was financed by legacy money, for which we were so very grateful.

In 2011 we were delighted to host a weekend for the National Methodist Youth Brass Band, and catered for the youngsters all sleeping on the church premises and making good use of Centenary House, during the day where their meals were served. It was wonderful to share in the concert on the Saturday and their contribution to the worship on Sunday morning was also greatly appreciated. In the summer of 2011 Stephen and Angela left us for their next appointment and Rev Ian Wales was appointed our minister. It was in 2011 that the Ladies Friendship Club closed after more than 50 years of existence, during which time members, both church goers and non-church goers, had entertained us with concerts, fed us on occasions and been a very popular and influential force within the life of Christchurch.

Early in 2013 the Christchurch Pre-School celebrated its 25th birthday with a birthday cake and tea party and we were delighted to share it with them. In 2014 Ian introduced us to the concept of Messy Church, which has now become a regular feature of the school holiday programme. Later that year Ian left us due to ill health, and we were most grateful to the Supernumery ministers and Local Preachers who helped out during that time. The church council members are trustees of the church and responsible for the fabric of the premises and with an ageing building repairs are constantly ongoing. We were very grateful to Veolia Environmental Trust in 2013, who supported us with a grant towards the costs of replacing the roofing of the Primary Room, kitchen and toilets. The balance of the cost was paid for by the Christchurch Ladies Supper Club, a group meeting at the church since Gordon Chambers was with us, and which is the main force behind the annual 3 day Festival of Flowers held each late Bank Holiday in May.

We welcome nearly 1000 visitors over the weekend and have been able to support many and various charities over the years with generous donations arising from the money raised at the Festival. In 2016 we were honoured to receive the 1006 Award for the Best Community Event. Christchurch has often been blessed by legacies from friends thinking of us and it was

those donations and legacies that we commemorated in the Festival of 2016 when the theme was 'In Appreciation'. The other main outreach and social events that the church hosts are the two annual Christchurch Singers' concerts in May and December. The choir is an ecumenical choir of around 40 members from our church, other churches and none! The church is always full to overflowing for these concerts, which are eagerly awaited by the many people who attend and again, various charities have benefited from the large sums of money raised.

In 2014 we were very grateful to Rev Peggy Heim, the minister in the Hastings and St.Leonards half of the circuit who took us under her wing as we had no minister of our own until 2015 when Rev Tricia Williams joined us. Peggy shared responsibility for all the 12 circuit churches with Rev Ian Pruden, our superintendent minister – a very heavy workload for them both. Since Tricia has been with us we have rejoiced in the starting of a fortnightly Tuesday afternoon Fun and Friendship group where folk can gather, play table tennis, snooker etc. knit, complete jigsaws or just natter: and the closing of the weekly Open House group after many years. As one door closes another opens! The two Bible Study/Housegroups continue to be very popular and include members from other churches. A look at the Annual Church Reports shows just how much is done in the name of Christ to further His word to all age groups and we hope that a warm welcome is given to all who enter our premises and use our facilities.

Only last year another legacy enabled us to knock down a wall and completely re-fit the kitchen to make it serviceable for 21st century use. We are also considering the appointment of a Lay Worker to further God's work in this place.

As we write, there are plans for a Review of the Bexhill Methodist Churches, so once again, the future is uncertain. As Joyce wrote, back in 1996 'Just as our Christian faith evolves through the years of our life, so this Church has been adapted to the needs of each succeeding generation.' Those Belle Hill members who took the brave decision to close their premises and walk to Christ Church in 1938 had great foresight and faith. May we be guided to do whatever is best for the future of Methodism in Bexhill.

George Bunker and Jill Read

LIST OF MINISTERS

Belle Hill

In Hastings Circuit:

1825	Rev. T. Ludlam
1826	Rev. J. Crowe
1827	Rev. J. Johnson
1828-29	Rev. H. Davies
1830	Rev. J. Thomas
1831-33	Rev. G. Jackson
1834-36	Rev. J. Hollis
1837	Rev. J. Knowles
1838	Rev. W. Davies
1839	Rev. W. Crookes
1840-41	Rev. W. Bytheway
1842	Rev. J. Philp
1843-45	Rev. E. Jennings
1846-48	Rev. J. Brownell
1849	Rev. H. Williams

Continued in Hastings Circuit
until 1886

1886	Rev. J. Rodwell
1889	Rev. J. Finch

Bexhill Ministers:

1892	Rev. D.G. Macrae
1893	Rev. A.W. Cooke MA
1894	Rev. F. Bretherton BA
1897	Rev. B. Crosby
1900	Rev. H. Wright
1903	Rev. H. Chaplin
1906	Rev. J. Johnstone
1909	Rev. H. Whiting
1913	Rev. J. Williams
1915	Rev. B. Dalby
1919	Rev. J. Almond
1923	Rev. J. Hallam
1927	Rev. R. Hothersall BA
1930	Rev. L. Clench
1933	Rev. W. Parrott

Christ Church

1919-20	Rev. J. Phippen
1920-21	Rev. T. Mosley BA
1921-24	Rev. W. Bird
1924-26	Rev. J. Bennett
1926-28	Rev. I. Wall
1928-31	Rev. L. Allison
1931-33	Rev. R. Waugh
1933-38	Rev. D. Bowman

Since Amalgamation

1938-40	Rev. J. Clough	1971-81	Rev. L. Truelove
1940-45	Rev. F. Hargreaves	1981-91	Rev. G. Chambers BD
1945-46	Rev. B. Medd	1991-96	Rev. C. Park MA
1946-50	Rev. J. Berry	1996-08	Rev. R. Leslie
1950-55	Rev. F. Latham	2008-11	Rev. S. Maunder
1955-60	Rev. R. Rawlings	2011-14	Rev. I. Wales
1960-66	Rev. S. Taylor	2014-15	Rev. P. Heim BA, MA, MDiv
1966-69	Rev. K. Lyon	2015-	Rev. T. Williams BA (Hons)
1969-71	Rev. J. Jones		